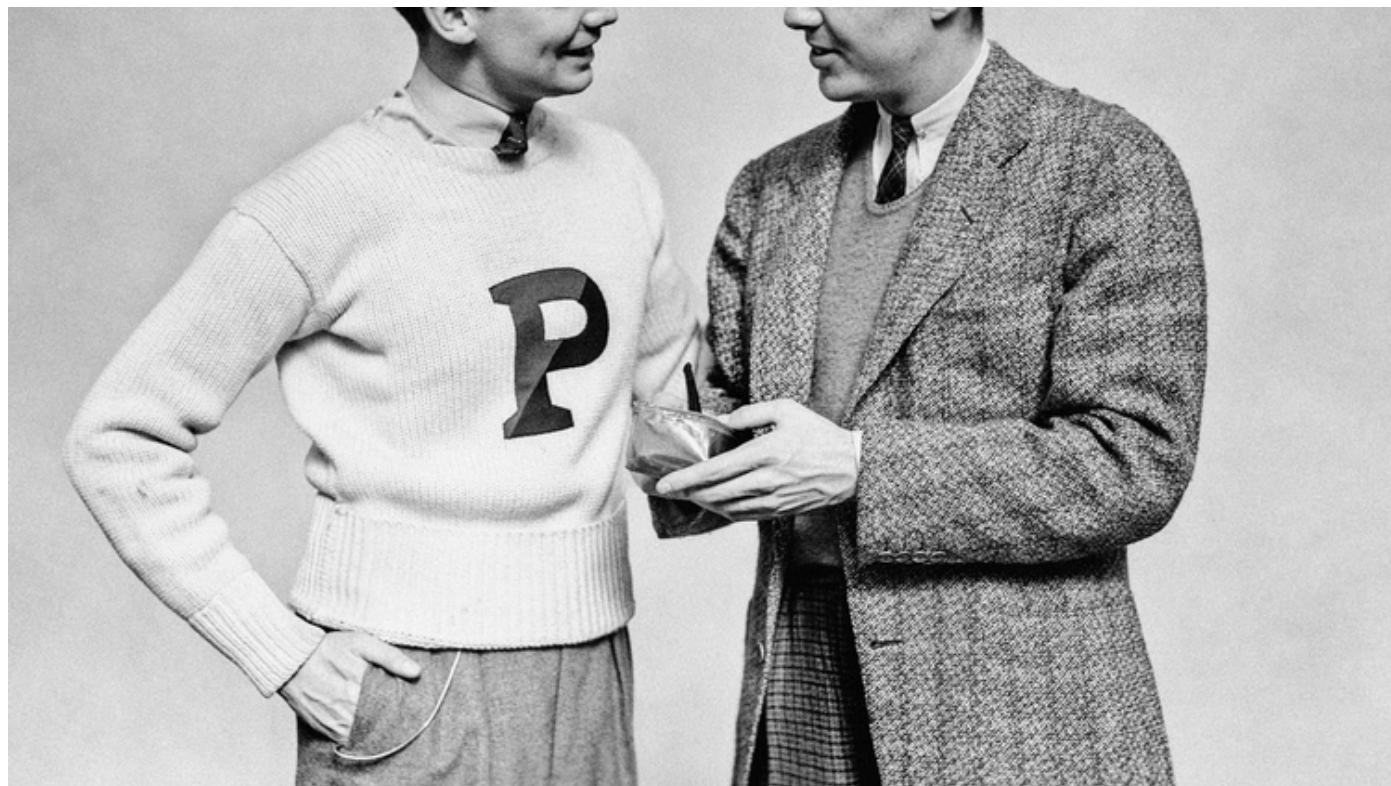


Why You Have to Care About These 12 Colleges

Change them, and you change America.

By [Annie Lowrey](#) July 24, 2023



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What does Harvard do? What is Yale for? What is Dartmouth's purpose?

The schools themselves have ready answers to those questions. Harvard says it exists to "educate the citizens and citizen-leaders for our society" through the "transformative power of a liberal arts education." Dartmouth "educates the most promising students and prepares them for a lifetime of learning and of responsible leadership through a faculty dedicated to teaching and the creation of knowledge."

Sure. But viewed in a different way, these schools prompt children to engage in [soul-destroying bloodsport](#) to distinguish themselves from one another in order to secure one of a tiny number of spots offered each year. *Promising* is often a synonym for *rich already*. The schools shape these students, mold them, sometimes for free, sometimes at [laughable cost](#). Then they unleash them on society, perhaps having taught them something and certainly having socially bound them together and anointed them as elites.

New research [published this morning](#) from three economists—Raj Chetty of Harvard, David Deming of Harvard, and John Friedman of Brown University—confirms that these kids do indeed become elites. Compared with attending one of the best public colleges, attending an Ivy or another super-selective private school increases a student's chance of reaching the top of the earnings distribution by 60 percent and "has even larger impacts on other non-monetary measures of upper-tail success, such as attending an elite graduate school or working at a prestigious firm." These schools "amplify the persistence of privilege across generations," the economists find.

That means that just by changing their admissions policies, these colleges could make the country's leadership more socioeconomically diverse.

"People sometimes ask: Within the broad scope of trying to increase social mobility and address inequality in America, why is it important to spend your time focusing on 12 colleges that educate less than half a percent of Americans? Surely this can't be important by the numbers," Chetty told me. "That is right. But if you look at the people in positions of great influence—leading politicians, scientists, journalists—an incredibly disproportionate number come from these 12 colleges. To the extent those folks have a big influence on lots of other people's lives, diversifying who is in those positions matters."

The [new research](#) demonstrates that Harvard matters. Yale works. All of the colleges known in the literature as “Ivy Plus”—the Ivies plus Stanford, MIT, Duke, and the University of Chicago—are worth it. These schools really are different in terms of propelling a given student into the country’s ruling class.

That may seem like common sense. But it does contradict or complicate a body of prior research indicating that [many kids do not benefit](#) from going to Cornell versus the University of Texas at Austin. If admitted to both an Ivy and a top-tier state school, these studies show, a student’s earnings are likely to end up the same regardless of which one they attend; the real enduring source of advantage seems to be growing up rich in the first place.

But not quite, the new research from Chetty, Deming, and Friedman finds. On average, a kid’s earnings end up roughly the same whether they go to Penn or to Penn State. But kids who attend super-elite schools rather than state flagship institutions are 60 percent more likely at age 33 to be in the top 1 percent of the income distribution, nearly twice as likely to go to a tippy-top graduate school, and nearly three times as likely to be employed at a firm like Goldman Sachs or Google.

You can become a successful doctor whether you go to one of these colleges or not, Chetty told me. “But if you’re talking about access to these positions or institutions of great influence—top companies, top graduate programs, clerkships and so on—there’s a doubling or tripling of your chances. There’s really quite a large effect there.”

The project of elite diversification has become more tenuous since the Supreme Court’s decision to ban [affirmative action](#). White kids remain overrepresented at many elite colleges, and rich kids remain very, very, very overrepresented. But the new paper suggests a straightforward set of policies that would still let these schools diversify themselves—without

making any sacrifice in terms of student quality or ambition.

The first step is to eliminate legacy admissions, [as Wesleyan did last week](#). Most of these schools have an extremely strong preference for the children of alumni, and especially the children of wealthy alumni. (Among the Ivy Plus schools, only MIT does not consider where an applicant's parents went.) Legacy kids whose parents are in the top 1 percent of the earnings distribution have a 40-percentage-point advantage in admissions compared with non-legacy kids with equivalent test scores; that advantage falls to just 15 percentage points for less wealthy students. This alumni preference acts as affirmative action for wealthy white kids.

Second is getting rid of recruitment policies for athletes. Participating in a sport—including a niche, moneyed sport such as fencing or sailing—gives kids an admissions boost equivalent to earning an additional 200 points on the SAT, one [study found](#). At many elite schools, athletic programs function as a way to [shuttle in rich kids](#) who would not get in otherwise. "People sometimes have the intuition that student athletes might come disproportionately from lower-income or middle-income families," Chetty told me. "That's not true."

Third is putting less emphasis on super-high "non-academic" ratings. Pretty much all kids who matriculate at the Ivy Plus institutions have résumés thick with leadership-cultivating, creativity-showcasing activity: volunteering, playing an instrument, making art. But kids from the country's Eton-like secondary schools, such as Exeter and Milton, tend to have especially strong recommendations and padded résumés, ones Harvard and Yale love. "These admissions preferences tilt strongly in favor of the rich," Chetty noted.

Getting rid of the admissions policies favoring athletes, legacies, and résumé padders would increase the share of kids from the bottom 95 percent of the

parental-income distribution by nearly nine percentage points, the study finds. Yale, Harvard, and the other super-elite schools would each replace about 150 kids from rich families with kids from low- and middle-income families each year.

In addition, the economists find, schools could bolster their admissions preferences for low- and middle-income kids with excellent test scores. Such a policy would have an equally large impact on admissions and would *improve* the student body's outcomes in the long term.

I would add one more policy that could have an even bigger effect: simply matriculating many more students. The Ivy Plus schools have a combined endowment of more than \$200 billion yet mint fewer than 25,000 college graduates a year. Surely they could enroll many more kids—twice as many, four times as many, 10 times as many—by spending less on things such as sports facilities and dining halls and more on scholarships and teaching.

Shuffling who gets into a set of schools educating just a tiny sliver of students won't end American inequality, of course. But it might transform elite America in a way that might transform elite America's priorities. "You have literally 12 colleges with 12 college presidents who, if they wanted to, could together pretty significantly change who is holding positions of influence in the United States," Chetty told me. "Just 12 people being able to do that, unilaterally? It's rare that you find that kind of lever."